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ABSTRACT

Despite the obvious intersections between the studies of interpersonal and mass communication, an unnecessary separation exists between those two closely related (sub)disciplines. Two avenues of connection between these areas of study are the concepts of gap bridging, and application of visual analysis to conversation analysis. James Guardino has proposed the effects of messages as the core essence of communication, but a step further back from the message should be incorporated, which is the impetus for the message: what other writers have referred to as "the gap." A generic model of communication is based on an earlier model of multi-image communication and B. Dervin's gap theory. To truly understand successful communicatings, scholars must study both the conditions of the gap and the exchange of interaction which attempts to bridge it. The terminology of "window," "frame," and "mirror" from the field of mass communication can be used to study interpersonal interactions. Using five major visual media of painting, photography, cinema, video, and multi-image as subjects for analysis of the relationships between spatial depiction and viewer engagement, the "window" orientation focuses on content, while the frame imagery renders a flatter sense of visual space. The use of various scenarios of gap theory and the conceptualizations allowed through the "window/border/mirror" metaphors are a means to bring both groups of communication scholars closer together. (Contains 4 figures, 3 notes, and 35 references.) (RS)

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# Gaps and Serpents; Windows, Borders, and Mirrors:

## Merging of Analytical Tools from

## Mass and Interpersonal Communication

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A Presentation to the Panel:
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# GAPS AND SERPENTS; WINDOWS, BORDERS, AND MIRRORS: MERGING OF ANALYTICAL TOOLS FROM MASS AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Despite the obvious intersections between the studies of interpersonal and mass communication, there still seems to be an unnecessary separation between these two closely related (sub)disciplines. Peters (1994) notes that the subject of mass media has often been characterized as the inferior of the two by many communication theorists and writers, described as "one way, impersonal, distant, and an unprecedented product of new technologies while communication per se--that is, interpersonal communication--was taken to be interactive, personal, face-to-face, and direct" (p. 118). Indeed, a separation of some sort between these two approaches seems to be the norm in academic training, classroom practice, textbook structure, and scholarly inquiry.[1] It is the purpose of this writing to offer two avenues for connection between these two areas of study: (1) concepts of gap bridging, and (2) applications of visual analysis to conversation analysis. The offer is made in recognition of the pedagogical situation in the '90s, where FTE cuts at all levels and staffing limitations at small colleges leave faculty needing to help each other in presenting a wide range of courses. Especially in such a climate, bridges seem to be more productive than walls.

The exploration of connections between interpersonal and mass communication is nothing new, although the topic certainly has not yet been exhausted. The SCA Index to Journals in Communication Studies [1915] through 1990 lists 104 articles on this subject, which on one hand seems impressive but is actually a very low total for 75 years of indexing especially given the enormous numbers of total entries for interpersonal and the various categories of mass communication. Further, there seem to be very few significant texts in this area, with one of the most notable being an anthology first published in 1979 (Gumpert and Cathcart) which contained classic writings on relevant topics between the two fields

(Boorstein [1979] on pseudo-events and celebrities, Horton and Wohl [1979] on para-social relationships and interactions), invaluable summaries of vital theory and research (Schramm [1979] on channels and audiences, Rogers [1979] on mass media and interpersonal interactions--with essential information on topics such as selection, perception, attention, and opinion leaders), and studies on uses of radio, especially talk radio (Avery and Ellis [1979], Dominick [1979], Mendelsohn [1979]), which prove to have on-going currency in a society where conservative talk radio is often cited as a source of Republican victory in the 1994 congressional elections.

There were also updates of this anthology in 1982 and 1986, with a good rotation of material each time: only the Horton and Wohl (1979) article of the ones cited above continues into the third edition. Of significance to the issue at hand is one article that appears in the second and third editions (Avery and McCain, 1982), which is somewhat unique in that instead of encouraging connections between the two fields it supports the position of essential differences between interpersonal and mass communication: "(1) The technology of mass media messages inherently limits the sensory integration potential for receivers; (2) Receivers of mass media have no functional control over media sources; (3) Receivers of mass media messages have only limited or imaginary knowledge of media sources" (p. 30). Seemingly the only other major book on this topic (Hawkins, Wiemann, and Pingree, 1988) returns to the strong advocacy position on bringing the two fields of study together, with a concentration on social science approaches and research methodologies.

Despite any of the arguments in the above citations for better integration of these (sub)disciplines, contemporary texts on each area rarely bring in interactions between the two, possibly because of the interdisciplinary biases noted above by Peters (1994). In response to this situation, Livingstone (1994) makes a direct plea to bring down the barriers between the two fields:

> The traditional separation of interpersonal and mass communication,

> assumed in both administrative and critical traditions, is untenable. Ethnographic research particularly has shown the significant ways in which family talk about, say, the royal family or racism inevitably takes place in a media-dominated environment . . . and, conversely, that the media must be located in the living room--a locus of domesticity and family interaction . . . . The phenomenon of parasocial interaction, for example, means that we must now ask about rather than presume that we understand the overlapping processes that underlie both mass and interpersonal communication. (p. 250)

To note a recent, well-covered example of Livingstone's argument, consider the "whisper heard 'round the world" from Kathleen Gingrich to Connie Chung about "Newtie"'s opinion of Hillary Clinton. Clearly, the media were located "in the living room" on that interchange, as they have also been for months in their coverage of pre-trial arguments and actual testimony in the infamous O.J. Simpson murder case. Ironically, though, even the source of Livingstone's article, Defining Media Studies: Reflections on the Future of the Field (Levy and Gurevitch, 1994), an extensive exploration of the state of current communication scholarship reprinted from two recent issues of the Journal of Communication, itself tends to privilege mass media concerns throughout its contents. Livingstone is firm in his conviction, though, as are Gumpert and Cathcart (1986) in their exploration of the idea that personal self-image is becoming media-dependent because of the avalanche of photographically-based commercial images in our culture. They further argue that this change in perspective needs to be reflected by changes in our discipline, including the development of a typography of "mediated interpersonal communication" [emphasis theirs] (p. 89).

There exists, then, a tension between these two interrelated fields, possibly due to the conceptualization by some that interpersonal continues the time-honored tradition of rhetoric and possibly due to interdepartmental funding hostilities around the higher social recognition factor of "media" and "technology." Joining most of the authors cited above, I would like to contribute to (re)integration within the discipline of communication, but how? Without intending to be offensive to religious sensibilities, I suggest that one approach might be to liken communication to a secular version of the

Christian concept of the Trinity. After all, in a culture where it is possible to find a book (on theological questions) and a CD (recitation of the rosary) by Pope John Paul II on best seller lists--as well as to find him named as Time magazine's 1994 "Man of the Year"--to find equally robust sales for traditional chants by Spanish monks, and to hear renewed calls for sanctioned prayer in public schools, it is not so inappropriate to offer a religious analogy as an answer for an academic problem. As explained by Karen Armstrong in A History of God (1993), though, the Trinity is a complex concept that has inspired and troubled Christianity relative to other monotheistic religions as it attempts to present God as having one mysterious essence but several tangible manifestations. This largely Romanized doctrine has proven to be difficult for the older (Hebrew, Greek Orthodox) traditions on which it is based, as well as for the chronologically younger Islam which also harkens back to a Semitic tradition seemingly more attuned to Judaism.

Clearly, those outside of the concept of the Trinity find it unnecessarily confusing and difficult, just as other academic disciplines often are amazed at the seemingly rigid boundaries within our general field of communication. And, rather than being concerned at this point with explaining or converting, we would do well to better understand what needs the semi-autonomy of our various (sub)disciplines serve for those within the discipline of communication while simultaneously rediscovering and reaffirming the essence that lies at our core, the common ground from which specialized concepts such as interpersonal and mass proceed.

## The Gap

In a speech to the attendees at the Hope College Institute for Faculty Development in Holland, Michigan on August 3, 1994, James L. Guadino, Executive Director of SCA, also noted problems with the intradisciplinary tension in our field. He encouraged the development of core curriculum standards, academic skills, textbooks, and journals. As a working definition of communication he proposed "the effect of

messages on people" to serve as the basis for a common pedagogical understanding. He noted that unlike other fields of study where the practitioners have a basic set of agreed-upon fundamentals and often a recognized figure that the general public can identify with the discipline--for example, Stephen Hawking in physics--communication enjoys no such common core. Building on Guadino's comments, I would add that we often fragment ourselves further, becoming specialists not with visions of what constitute natural subdivisions of a basic body of knowledge but with isolating attitudes that challenge the concept of a central core of communication. With a field that easily spans aspects of the fine arts, humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences, as practitioners we often build alliances with other departments in small colleges (pitting film and speech teachers against social analysts, for instance) or construct insulated empires of our own at larger universities. If anything, we may have already embraced a Trinity-like concept too fervently, emphasizing the identity, individuality, and importance of the manifested focus (say, interpersonal or mass) rather than the essential essence from which they emanate.

Like much monotheistic theology, though, we may find that there is an equally difficult problem in agreeing on the nature of the core essence. Guadino proposed the effect of messages which implies both a tangible subject of study and its more elusive impact. I propose incorporating a step further back from the message, which is the impetus for the message: what other writers have referred to as "the gap." Peters (1994) says, "The gaps at the heart of communication are not its ruin, but its distinctive feature" (p. 130). He also implies an ethical/religious analogy on the stature of communication, noting that Plato's Phaedrus privileged the interpersonal goal of completed interaction because Socrates required that "you need two souls in concert for love or wisdom" (p. 123), yet Jesus offered parables which are more like mass communication because "The diverse audience members who hear the parable are left to make of it what they will" (p. 124). Further, quoting Ricoeur, Peters notes that

"discourse escapes the limits of being face to face . . . [so that] An unknown, invisible reader has become the unprivileged addressee of the intercourse" (pp. 129-130). Peters then states:

> Mass communication theory considers effects, and hermeneutics considers reception. The fundamental theoretical problem facing each is the same: the radical indeterminancies of effects and reception.
>
> But these are also fundamental problems of communication theory in general. We all tend to risk acknowledging the fundamental gap at the heart of all discourse, even though negotiating the gap is a daily accomplishment most adult language-users are quite expert at. The physical presence of another is no guarantee that "communication" will happen [emphasis his]. (p. 131)

So, in addition to the bridge that the communication act implies (with the attendant study of the effects, if any) we find the gap itself at the heart of the communication discipline, along with the conditions which produce the gap and call forth the attempted construction of a successful bridge.

Curiously, one author that Peters does not cite is Brenda Dervin who has amassed considerable discourse on gap theory. Her extensive literature review of communication systems (1989b) points out the problem with traditional frameworks that create and reinforce "disparities between the have and the have-nots" (p. 217), which results in a "large proportion of U.S. citizens [being] conceptualized as information poor" (p. 221) and initiating communicators trying to act on this sense of control through attempts to structure compliance. She advocates instead a sense-seeking concept of human interaction and an accompanying social order that emphasizes each person as an active agent who brings a variety of stimuli--from knowledge to emotions--to bear on inevitable, daily decision making, "[A] consciousness which puts awareness of acts of constructing at its fundamental core and examines the communication of culture not in terms of nouns, but rather in terms of the verbs of both communication and culture" (Dervin and Clark, 1989, p. 8).

She further encourages a conception of communication as gap-bridging (1989a) in which dialogue is emphasized over transmission (p. 72). She claims that:

> the approach is simultaneously ethnographic because it allows respondents to define and anchor themselves in their own realities, qualitative because it is built on open-ended interviewing and reports findings primarily in qualitative terms, quantitative because procedures for quantitative analysis have been developed, and systematic because a general theory guides the approach to listening--a theory that is applicable to all situations but allows specificity in any situation [emphasis hers]. (p. 76)

She says that "the core construct of sense-making is the idea of the gap--how people define and bridge gaps in their everyday lives" (p. 77). In bridging these gaps, we, as active seekers in a communication situation, are searching for knowledge and alternatives that help us identify what has produced a given gap in a given spatiotemporal situation and what can be done to address the needs of all who face the gap, not just the majority. In another article (1991), she expresses her conclusion that:

> Communicating is best generalized via the gap idea because it focuses on communicating as constructing, as gap bridging, offering for comparative analysis and application a perspective that is both fundamental and applicable across situations while at the same time pertinent to specific situations. Regardless of situational or historical context, all communicating entities (e.g., cultures and individuals in cultures) bridge gaps. (p. 62)

Dervin proposes a much more complex understanding of the constantly active, ongoing process of communication which leads to a matrix model of the situation-defining strategies and communicative tactics between self and society:

> In this formation, we recognize that individual behavior, constructed uniquely (at least in part) for each new moment of living, is susceptible to change as each individual constructs ways of dealing with the inherent unmanageability of reality. It is this individuality which appears chaotic. On the other hand, we assume that there is something systematic to be understood by looking at behavioral or procedural consistencies, rather than individual consistencies, by changing the focus from person to behavior, from state to process . . . . In a world where sense is not given, every relationship involves daily acts of constructing via communicating. The individual needs to relate to self, to other individuals, to collectives; collectives also need to relate to self, and to individuals as well as other collectives. (Dervin and Clark, 1993, pp. 110-11, 114)

In their chapter, the above authors detail examples of the web of options that inform these interactions (pp. 122-129).

Of course, there may seem to be problems in reconciling Dervin's position with Peters if they are at odds about her notion of emphasizing dialogue over transmission (1989a), in that he would likely counter:

> The image of conversation as two speakers, taking turns in order to move progressively toward fuller understanding of each other masks two deeper facts: that not all discourse, however many the speakers, must bridge the gap between one turn and the next, and that the intended addressee may never be identical with the actual one. (1994, p. 132)

Thus he continues his argument that the process of mass communication--illustrated by broadcasting--represents the basic act of human interaction, that gaps are at the heart of the need for communication but that we may only attempt to bridge them, whether in person or through some form of mediated discourse. Only the need--the gap--and the attempted response--the bridge, or the message in Guadino's terms--are constant, with the quest for defining effect being the stimulus for the ever ongoing process of attempting to understand both the gap and the bridge. Hopefully, Dervin would comfortably be part of this dialogue, as she continues to stress the essential elements of activity and difference in a process she prefers to be called "communicatings" rather than communication (1994). While she certainly prefers a completed dialogue (as Peters likewise presents Socrates), she would surely admit that such a result is not always available, although when a communicative effort is maintained through any form of discourse the option for eventual closure continues to exist.

## The Bridge

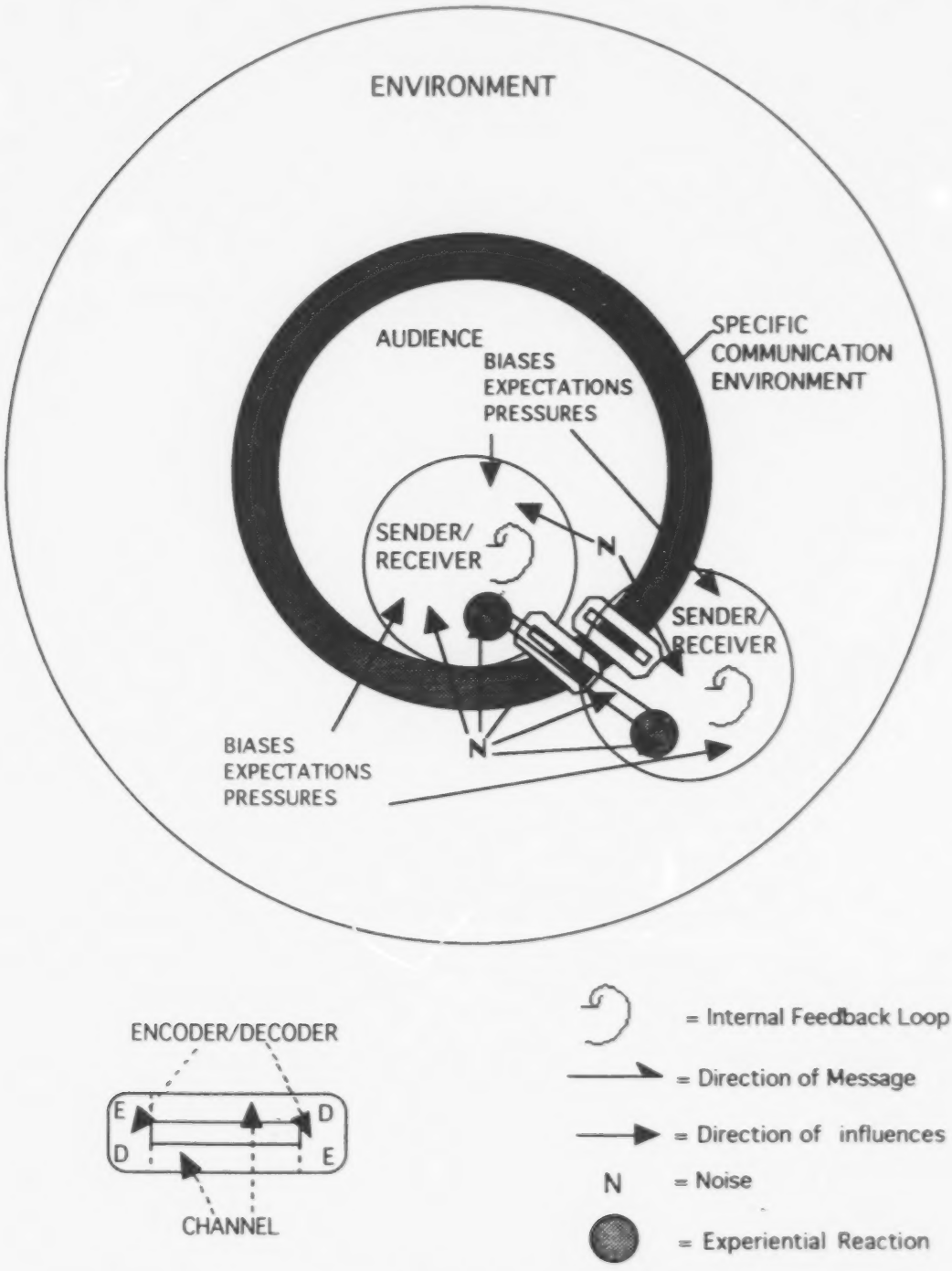
Where I finally come into all of this begins with a paper I wrote (Burke, 1992) on Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's 1991 book, Feminism without Illusions. As part of a panel presentation, I was exploring her critique of the rights of individuals relative to the larger communities they inhabit and her encouragement of the community-conscious individual. As a means of approaching the resolution of the problem of recognizing personal freedom and maturation in a society that often fails to transfer these goals

into supportive communal environments, I recommended attention to Dervin's conception of gap theory and illustrated this with a model that had originally been presented (Burke, 1977) as deriving from my dissertation; this 1992 model is presented here as Figure 1. Originally, the model in Figure 1 was used to diagram the interchange between producers (located in the larger environmental circle) and critics (specified within the audience circle)--clients, supervisors, teachers, etc.--of multi-image slide-tape programs, demonstrating an aspect of adapting phenomenological aesthetics to these hybrid communication structures in order to establish a consistent method of critical inquiry. Although I did not state so in the original dissertation or the 1977 article, I felt that this model could be used to represent film and television criticism as well, and, in all cases, what was being explored was how the critic of a mediated work functions as a hypothetical representative of the target audience, examining and evaluating the work produced as it might serve the needs of people who would experience the presentation in a specific communication environment that might or might not contain the producer during delivery of the program.

Thus, the critic and the producer often engage in an interpersonal exchange that is seemingly done for the benefit of the (potentially more anonymous) audience, although this exchange as well would move into the realm of mediated distance if the focus were on film or television rather than multi-image. Multi-image is a very specialized form of mediated communication which may play to paying general audiences (most often at World's Fairs, but also at exhibit orientations in museums and in permanent theatres such as "The San Francisco Experience" at Pier 39). In such circumstances there might be published reviews of the projected work, but generally the critic would be the paying client who would be directly negotiating with a producer over the final state of the project, as it is intended to appeal to or inform its upcoming anonymous audience. More often, though, multi-image is produced to be shown in limited circumstances to a specialized audience--at an annual sales meeting

Figure 1

A generic model of communication, based on Burke's (1977) model of multi-image communication and Dervin's (1989a, 1989b) gap theory.




From "Mythical Structures in Community Vision" by Ken Burke, Paper, Central States Communication Association, April 1992

or convention, for example--where the client/critic is actively a part of the target audience and serves as their advocate in negotiations/critical commentary with the producer.

In this manner, the procedure I developed for formulating and applying criticism to the newly-emerging process of multi-image communication was intended to give theoretical and functional structure to interpersonal dialogues which occur in the design and evaluation of a media product for an audience. Without my realizing it at the time, the audience-defining situation of my Specific Communication Environment is a gap, which needed to be bridged by the interchange between critic and producer, each one acting as an encoder/decoder, each one interacting across the gap (the perceived structure and needs of the target audience), each one utilizing the channels of direct speech (and possibly an evaluation instrument which I proposed and later refined [Burke, Ziegler, and Book, 1983-84]), and each one part of a dynamic process of message formation via internal conceptualization /feedback loops and personal experiential reaction, impacts of noise and influences from within the environment, and quality of the messages themselves. Although this model directly indicated that the criticism process would occur in an interpersonal exchange, the gap to be bridged--first between producer and critic, then between producer and audience through the showing of the program itself--is one of larger audience concerns, analogous in purpose, if not in audience size, to the concerns of mass communication. In 1992 when I revised and slightly modified this model by changing the name of the participants to "sender/receiver," with the understanding of Dervin's active gap-bridger as filing either role interchangeably, it seemed plausible that this media-inspired model would offer some relevance not only to gap theory but to the community-building topic that was the subject of the paper on Fox-Genovese (1991).

As I saw it then, whether a seeker initiates an information-gathering message (as sender) or is open to gathering one (as receiver) she or he will always

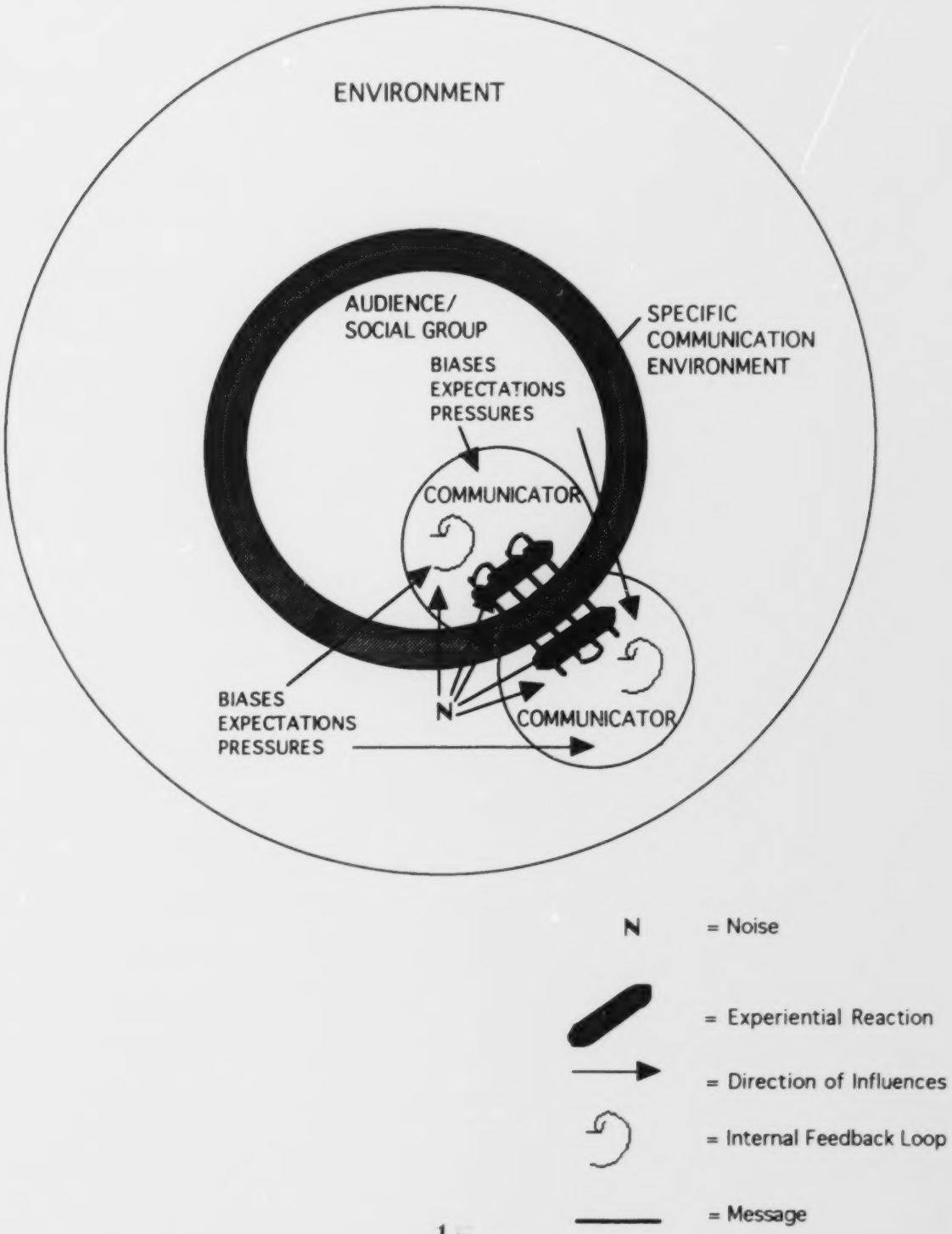
simultaneously be part of a specific context (an audience of some sort) and a general context (the environment). Each sense-seeking situation would provide a gap to be bridged between these contexts, optimally allowing the person (and possibly the whole audience group) to become more securely situated within the larger structure, through the various processes of formulating, generating, and sharing messages in a variety of encounters. Accordingly, the focus would be on the seeker, with this gap-bridger actively performing both of the traditional roles of sender and receiver, as circumstances warrant.

Models of such a complex process as communication are difficult to construct, though, because of the many factors which must be considered, which often produce contradictory or insufficient results, as noted by Krippendorff (1994) and Meyrowitz (1994). In addition to whatever other shortcomings my model may contain, my personal correspondence with Dervin indicated that she felt my terminology of "sender," "receiver," "channel," "noise," etc. still connoted too much of a presupposed rather than a dynamic process. While respecting her position, I have still retained "noise" in Figure 2 (because I see it as an inherently necessary component of the communicative process, although some might see it as subsumed under my other influences of biases, expectations, and pressures which come from within our social groups as well as from the larger environment) as well as most of my other terms. However, I have changed the structure of the interchange from a vehicle of encoding and decoding, which was presented as a physical bridge that carried messages across a gap, to a combination of concepts from Schramm (1971) and Pearce (1994).

From Schramm comes the vital concept of overlapping frames of reference which says that no true communication will occur until the participants themselves share some level of common translation and understanding (pp. 30-33). Thus, the bridge over the gap is actually the shared frame of reference, as presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

A generic model of communication, based on Burke's (1977) model of multi-image communication, Dervin's (1989a, 1989b) gap theory, and Pearce's (1994) serpentine model.



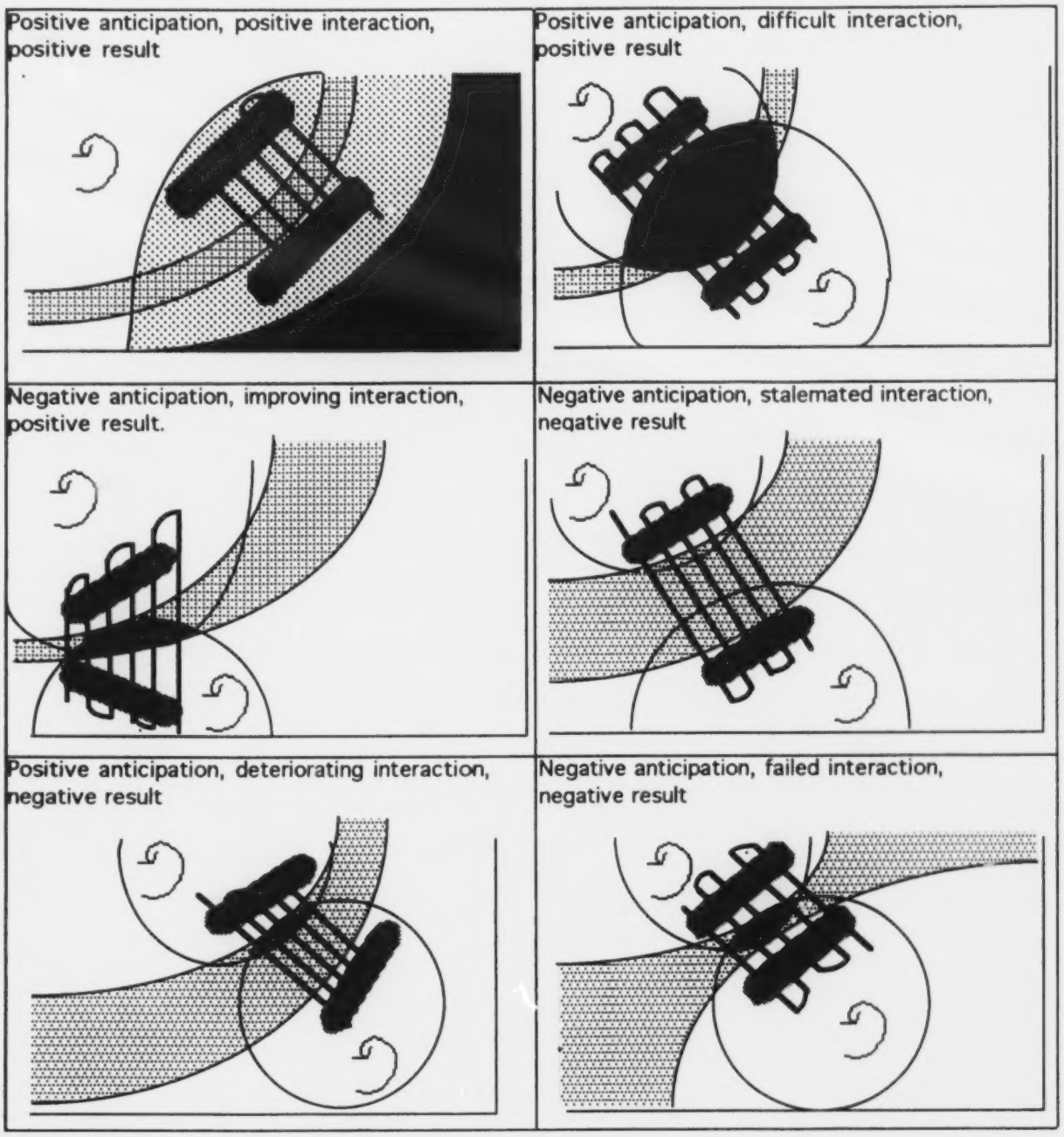
However, the means by which the gap is bridged, the process of finding the shared frame of reference is borrowed from Pearce's serpentine model (p. 31), which is named after the winding path by which communicators interact in exploring their frames of reference, at times drawing close and at other times wandering far afield. This model is representative of Pearce's focus throughout his book: that communication is a fluid, dynamic process of social construction rather than just message transmission (pp. 18-26), that social worlds are in a continuous process of being remade in conjunction with other people (pp. 74-81), that speech acts are co-constructed (pp. 119-124), and that acts of communication are contained within conceptual frames (pp. 168-170).

Of course, there are many perils in navigating the gap which remain from Figure 1: each communicator's world of understanding as defined by the workings of internal feedback loops and the filters of our individual experiential reaction; the various influences communicators feel from their peer groups and from the larger social context; the distortions that occur within each communicator's processings that inhibit the clarity of the interchange; as well as the attitudes and expectations each communicator brings to the encounter. Finally, as Dervin notes above, it is always too simple to suggest that any participant is distinctly noted as the initiator reaching into the confines of the target group. Where the encounter is in some way directly interpersonal, each participant likely sees her/himself as the representative from the larger environment so that this model really needs to be three-dimensional, in motion, and constantly interchanging as a mirror image of itself to even approach a complete depiction of the communication process.

With these limitations in mind, though, we can note some likely patterns in these interactions, as presented in Figure 3, whether the interaction is directly interpersonal or mediated, as explained by Peters (1994). For purposes of demonstration, I have simplified the encounter examples to always begin with the"outside" communicator

Figure 3

Some likely patterns of humans communicating (Elaborations of Figure 2)


Positive anticipation, positive interaction, positive result
Positive anticipation, difficult interaction, positive result
Negative anticipation, improving interaction, positive result.
Negative anticipation, stalemated interaction, negative result
Positive anticipation, deteriorating interaction, negative result
Negative anticipation, failed interaction, negative result

and to be one of six major variations of anticipation, interaction, and result, with a corresponding + or - assigned to each element. Three of the six variations produce successful gap bridging, with a total positive "weight" of 2 or 3 to the encounter.

First, we have a narrow initial gap, large overlapping frames of reference, and an easily narrowing serpentine path, where both sides presume success (as with a romantic exchange between lovers, or a comedy buff receptively watching an episode of a TV sitcom) and are quickly rewarded.[2] A variation of this is a positive anticipation, followed by a more difficult than expected encounter, and a final bridging that takes considerably more effort than originally assumed (as with friends discovering a topic of previously unknown tension, or a fan of Demi Moore's sentimental screen image in Ghost being initially confounded but eventually won over by a surprisingly more ruthless character in Disclosure). The inverse of this, with a similar positive outcome, results from a negative anticipation that is overcome by an increasingly productive interchange (as with a tense blind date settling into mutual attraction or a radio listener annoyed by a station's new format but warming to the change over time). In both the second and third scenarios the serpentine path is long and potentially treacherous, but ultimately a connection is found or improved that links the two.

Negative outcomes, with a -2 or -3 tally, result from either a complete failure to overlap any frame of reference, positive intentions that deteriorate into meandering drifts as the gap continues to widen, or limited expectations that come surprisingly close to connection but ultimately fail to achieve closure. The first negative encounter from Figure 3 would be illustrated by a chance encounter at a party where stabs at conversation never take hold and both communicators finally wander off in different directions, or there could be an action-adventure movie fan unsuccessfully brought by a companion to a wordy foreign film, punctuated by many bored trips to the lobby. The second scenario could be a feuding couple anxiously hoping to resolve their differences but finding that every attempt to heal simply inflicts another wound;

likewise, a television viewer could have a first exposure to a highly-rated program, eager to share in the show's appeal, yet find it increasingly stereotypical and uninteresting. The final negative outcome from Figure 3 could be illustrated with the professional baseball strike negotiations--at least as they are being reported to the outside world--where initial hostilities seemed to be giving way to creative "taxation" plans, only to have the whole process collapse around the deal-breaking salary cap. In a mass media context, this case could be represented by a reader of an op-ed column who disagrees with the opening premises of the writer on an issue such as welfare reform, is gradually encouraged toward an unexpected mutual point of view, then rejects the conclusions as unacceptable nonsense. In each of these negative interchanges, the serpentine paths of interaction just wander farther away, providing inadequate support for a bridge across the gap.

## Framing the Encounter

To truly understand successful communicatings, then, we must study both the conditions of the gap (what constitutes it, who or what caused it) and the exchange of interaction--direct or mediated--which attempts to bridge it. The condition itself and the corresponding response are what constitute communication. Studying just the nature of the gap leads more into psychology and sociology while studying just the bridge and its effects leads to linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, or again to the social sciences. Full communication study requires an understanding of all aspects of this situation and their interactions, as suggested by the variations presented in Figure 3, but from this micro level we can easily explore back out as far as we wish into the larger environment of Figure 2. One final tactic for blending the study of interpersonal and mass communication is also suggested by Pearce (1994) in his discussion of circular questioning, which helps to analyze both the gap and its bridge from both first and third person perspectives (pp. 27-40).

Figure 4

**MEDIA/SPACE/ABSTRACTION RELATIONSHIPS**

| MEDIA | SPATIAL EMPHASIS | |
|---|---|---|
| | Deep | Flat |
| Painting | Content | Process (More Abstract) |
| Photography | Content | Process (More Abstract) |
| Cinema | Content | Process (Somewhat More Abstract*) |
| Video | Content | Process (Somewhat More Abstract**) |
| Multi-Image | Content | Content *** Process |

*Like painting and photography, more avant-garde approaches lead to abstraction; however, in traditional film narrative, perceived flatness is a property of industry technology which leads to greater illusionism and concentration on story in more recent works.

**As with the above media, more emphasis on avant-garde procedure leads to abstraction; likewise, a concentration on traditional narrative technology and content implies varying degrees of perceived depth. Still, compared to the previous media, video's very use of design and delivery systems lends itself to more audience awareness of process.

***Even more so than video, multi-image is always demonstrative of its process which lends a constant sense of abstraction even to "window"-oriented individual images.

The purpose of his methodology is to help both participants in and observers of an interchange to frame the experience in larger contexts in order to help tighten the serpentine path toward a more effectively shared frame of reference. As we try to improve our own communicating styles or analyze the relative success of others in a variety of settings, we might benefit from a focus on the anticipations I noted in Figure 3. How the various communicators in interactive situations approach their roles, the conditions of the gap, and their appraisals of anticipated outcomes could be very influential in determining the length and complexity of the serpent's path. As we follow Pearce's procedures of circular questioning in attempting to reveal motivations, assumptions, and expectations in communication exchanges we will find that the framing posture of each of the participants is essential in constructing and determining the outcome. As a means of offering an analytical metaphor from the field of mass communication to the study of interpersonal interactions, I would like to suggest the analytical potential carried by the terminology of "window," "frame," and "mirror."

I have taken this perspective from the insights offered by Andrew (1984) and Zettl (1990), then developed it into a framework for studying visual communication. Andrew presents the age-old conflict in film theory between the conception of cinema as: (1) a "frame"--as posited by such seminal writers as Eisenstein and Arnheim--where the viewer is conceived as being consciously made aware of the process of cinematic construction, and (2) a "window"--as championed by equally influential scholars such as Bazin and Kracauer--where the viewer is ideally encouraged to find perceptual reality in the cinematic image (pp. 12-19). Zettl explores a similar conception in his accounts of images which encourage a viewer to subjectively "look into" or objectively "look at" what is presented (pp. 209-217). From these ideas I have constructed Figure 4, which details some comparisons of spatial depiction, which is presented as deep (with correspondences to "window" conceptions and "looking at" attitudes) or flat (which relates to the thinking associated with "frame"

and "looking into").

Using five major visual media of painting, photography, cinema, video, and multi-image (as least as they have developed in post-medieval Western societies) as subjects for analysis of these relationships between spatial depiction and viewer engagement, we can see that the "window" orientation, with its emphasis on techniques such as smooth brush strokes, full depth of field photography, and Hollywood-standard "invisible" editing, will inevitably lead to a focus on content, with attendant emphases for viewers and critics on plot, dialogue, symbolic "meaning," social value, and the like. Frame imagery, on the other hand, will literally tend to render a flatter sense of visual space because of the heightened awareness of process, which will lend a more abstract feel to the image and a more psychologically-involving sense of the viewer "looking into," to explore questions of motivation, conceptualization, artistic attitude, and semiotic/narrative structure.

These concepts have been presented elsewhere in more detail (Burke, 1991a; 1991b), but for now I will just note that the general development from "window" to "frame" analysis in western painting and photography has been fairly consistent in the art movements of the last 500 years or so (not to forget the constant presence of "window" imagery in commercial art and photography, or the occasional reassertion of aesthetic "window" conceptions, such as with Photo Realism), but the situation with projected media is more complex. With cinema there is a tendency to use the latest technologies of image capture and postproduction manipulation to enhance a "window" reading, so that, ironically, Jurassic Park (1993) blends its computer generated, full color dinosaurs so successfully into the photographic landscape that this film has a more "real" appearance and provides more of a "looking at" experience than Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) with its black and white cinematography, time-compression montage sequences, rear projection processes, and dialogue characteristic of another historical era. Hence, in cinema older films, with their more

obvious technical means and cultural status as objects of study, ironically become more "frame"-like to the sensibilities of the modern viewer. This does not prevent contemporary avant-garde films from being completely flat and abstract nor postmodernist works such as Pulp Fiction or Ed Wood (both 1994) from entering the realm of "looking into" experiences as well, but the more normal state for contemporary mainstream cinema is to be perceived as being in the "window" style.

Similarly, video has problems maintaining a "window" presence because its distracting presentation environment, image quality, smaller screen, and pattern of commercial interruption usually works against even the most intentional deep space experiences, such as TV dramas shot on film. When the process is live broadcast or videotape, with their accompanying high key lighting, limited performance sets, and obvious structures of audience responses, overlay graphics, and overuse of closeups, there is an ironic "frame" quality even to something as content driven as a newscast. Multi-image is the most inherently "frame"-like of all because of its noticeable environment of specially arranged presentation equipment, along with an abundance of obvious design concepts such as dissolves, soft-edge image overlaps, masking of images to modify the screen space, etc. Thus, these concepts of "window" and "frame" as summarized in Figure 4 are a fine conceptual starting point for analyzing a mediated communication experience, but they require much attention to their intricacies to be effective critical tools.

Still, they offer yet another means of sharing insights from the world of mass communication study with the situations to be encountered in interpersonal interactions. Specifically, in trying to understand the attitudes that communicators bring to the all-important gap-bridging opportunity, we should ask how each participant views not only the presumed outcome but also the circumstances of the encounter. Does one or the other have a whole or partial "window" approach to the

event, trying to focus on content, purpose, and results, in a manner similar to Pearce's (1994) third-person attitude:

> From a third-person perspective (i.e., as if we were not a part of the conversation), we can understand a conversation [and mediated encounters] as a game-like pattern of social interaction comprised of a sequence of acts, each of which evokes and responds to the acts of other persons [emphasis his]. (p. 31)

Likewise, the "frame" orientation may be what is driving both the anticipation and the serpent's progress of the interaction, with a "looking into" involvement that for Pearce:

> reminds us that from the first-person perspective, conversations [and mediated encounters] have to be made by doing something in a temporal context after someone has done something and before they do something else. From the perspective of the conversant, these doings are not a free choice; they are enmeshed in a logic of meaning and action that makes some action mandatory, optional, or prohibited [emphasis his]. (p. 28)

To me, the first person/"frame"/"looking into" cluster, as well as the third person /"window/"looking at" cluster are analogous concepts, but presenting the interchangeability of these analogies is just another method of bringing interpersonal and mass communication perspectives together for better synergy. If the adherents of each (sub)discipline can better understand what they already have in common, surely the necessary bridges within the field can be completed in a more efficient, effective manner.

A final concern for clarity here concerns the terminology of "frame," which has a useful context when conceived of as the frame of a visual image, the boundary which sets it off from the rest of the perceptual world, thereby calling attention to the created contents within its borders. However, the specific word "frame" in the context of interpersonal concerns may be too easily confused with the larger process of "framing," ascribing meaning to a situation (noted above in Pearce), which could easily apply to how both "window" and "frame" attitudes are conceived and constructed. Therefore, I will suggest the term "border" as the metaphor for more psychologically-

involving visuals or conversations, which require "looking into" for the fullest understanding and appreciation.

In addition to "window" and "border" attitudes, which in Zettl's (1990) terms respectively clarify and intensify the visual (or interpersonal) experience, Zettl also specifies how images can create events (pp. 211-214). Here he is talking of style and technique for their own sake which showcase the technical processes available in image construction. Such an obvious display of procedure--as with the use of superimpositions,360° camera movements, and digital effects processing--will also contribute to intensifying the viewer's experience, which takes "border" imagery beyond the limits of more traditional depictions such as subjective point of view or dramatic closeups. This attention to technical manipulation is reminiscent of Andrew's (1984) more current metaphor for film theory--the mirror (pp. 12-13)--which reminds us of more contemporary theoretical positions that are ultimately concerned with what the spectator brings to the experience of the image. Whether that analysis is conducted through the methodology of semiotics, narrative structure, psychoanalysis, ideological critique, or deconstruction, the metaphor of the mirror and Zettl's concept of creating an event reveal the active means by which meaning is constructed and experienced in the mass media.[3] This perspective certainly echoes the concern throughout Pearce's book as well about the social construction of meaning and the arbitrary, dynamic process of constructing and experiencing acts of interpersonal communication.

## Bridging the Gap

While the intradisciplinary gaps between the study of mass and interpersonal communication are not likely to be completely overcome anytime soon, there is certainly nothing to be gained by continuing to focus on just the gap rather than including its symbiotic relationship with the bridge. Both of these essential components of the communication act are common to each (sub)discipline and should be understood more fully both within the field and as a means of presenting the field to

the larger social environment. The use of various scenarios of gap theory and the conceptualizations allowed through the "window"/"border"/"mirror" metaphors are offered here as a means of bringing both groups of communication scholars closer together. The essence of the communication experience is already available for all parties to know and share, even as each camp maintains its grounding in the perspective that has already served it well.

## NOTES

[1]This is not to say that mass communication particularly enjoys a more favorable relationship with other types of communication either, although certain areas such as persuasion and intercultural do lend themselves to more natural connections. Still, I will admit that I spent five years at a major university in the 1970s from M.A. through Ph.D. study in a radio-TV-film department and never found a need to travel one floor up to interact with students or faculty in the speech communication department (nor was I aware of any traffic flow down to our domain).

[2]Just to clarify the graphic intentions of Figure 3. let me note that the upper left illustration is colored slightly differently than the others. In this illustration the left-hand communicator (the one located within the "Audience" circle in Figure 2) is rendered white and the right-hand communicator (the one located within the "Environment" circle in Figure 2) is toned a dark grey. Otherwise, it might be difficult to discern that they are completely dominating the illustration, indicating the closeness of their positions at the onset of the interchange and the relative ease by which their gap is bridged; thus, for visual clarity, their overlapping frame of reference has been lightly toned so that their experiential reactions can be shown in proximity and still be read in the illustration.

The other illustrations in Figure 3 use a dark tone to show the relative impact of the frame of reference: unlike in the upper left illustration,where the frame of reference is so encompassing that the interaction is completely enclosed by it, the upper right

illustration shows that the frame of reference is large but somewhat diffuse, so that the gap widens until it is finally clarified and bridged; the middle left illustration has a narrow frame of reference, as do both of the lower ones, to illustrate difficult situations which are either closed (left middle) or left unresolved (both lower); the middle right has no overlapping frame of reference, which is an automatic condition of hopeless frustration.

[3]Gumpert and Cathcart (1986) note this as well when they suggest studying photography as a message created by the viewer rather than by the photographer (pp. 95-96).

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